

BOOK TALK

— PRATIBHA NATH

TELLING TALES

Children's Literature in India

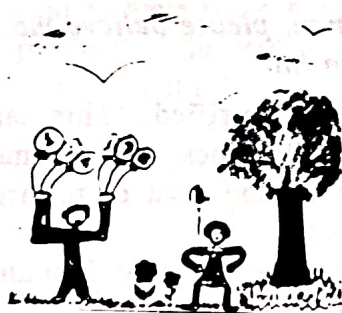
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Telling Tales

Children's Literature in India

Amit Dasgupta



About a decade back, an official of the Ministry of Education invited a group of some six or seven writers and editors to travel through the length and breadth of the country and prepare a comprehensive bibliography of children's literature in all the regional languages of India. It was a daunting task and not one of the people so honoured felt equal to it, partly also because the remuneration offered was paltry and the time allotted not enough by half. But they all agreed that such a bibliography would be very handy indeed. In the Indian context, children's literature as a separate genre of writing is of fairly recent origin. People don't know much about it because there aren't too many authoritative books on the subject. We could certainly do with some more - well researched, well written and balanced in judgement. As such, the present volume sets out to meet an urgent need and is very welcome.

When out to explore children's literature in India, you can take any one of three approach

roads — what has been, what is and what should be. Each of the fourteen contributors to this volume has taken the approach best suited to his/her perception and experience. As the book states at the very beginning, "The perfect recipe for a children's story is hard to put down." But some good analysis and some useful suggestions have come through. Children, unfortunately, have not been asked for their opinions but we have discerning critics beaming in on the work of some adults who talk to children in their own language.

The *Panchatantra* remains the source and fount of much of the literature for children in India, as do the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* (and this volume will not let us forget the fact). There is also the rich oral tradition of folk tales; and folk tales - as we all know - are not only stories but also a subtle record of the mores and norms of our society through the ages. They play a vital role in modelling the psyche and relationship of Indians. The *shastras* dictate that "....wealth, knowledge and food are gifts that must circulate." Stories are, in fact, knowledge, subtly camouflaged. Thus we have folk tales stressing the importance of *telling* folk tales and the harm that comes of keeping them to oneself! Stories have been travelling and the same tales are repeated in different parts of the country. Only individual tellers, by the manner of their telling make the meaning of a story come through, giving it different props and settings and dramatising what takes their fancy. Oral literature is everywhere in India and has continued through the ages. Communication via the oral tradition has helped communities and generations to grow.

Since there was a very definite limit to the scope of oral tradition, the written word came into its own, as a source of knowledge as well as entertainment. And the written word is now moving over

rather fast to make room for the electronic media. Children's literature as a separate genre is only about 200 years old, in India. For a long time it was clubbed with education and so loaded with messages and moral instruction. The focus is now shifting. Not only has children's literature come to enjoy a status of its own, it is being seen as a means of providing enjoyment and not (so much) instruction.

Again and again in the course of this book, writers have stressed the negative fallout of books from the west, notably those by Enid Blyton. Good, racy reading in themselves, these books project a picture entirely different from that which obtains in India. This can create an acute sense of 'resentment, disappointment and alienation' among children who don't have access to this kind of lifestyle. As it is, the present system of education leaves very little time for anything save cramming, but within the given parameters surely our children deserve better than a diet of 'hand-me-down literature'? Why are Indian children reading so much of Enid Blyton, though in the U.K. her popularity has waned? In this context one cannot help but quote from the article by Abha Adams. She says, "We have to build a relevant, modern, responsive, Indian, literary resource for our children. Until we do, while many parents push the irrelevances of our colonial past, our children will fall prey to the merchandisers and continue to seek out Western literature of little educational worth." (p.87)

A good part of this book is devoted to recounting the yeoman's service rendered by the CBT under the inspired guidance of Shankar Pillai, and other organisations like the NBT and NCERT. A welcome input is the names of writers who have made a significant contribution, along with their works. A separate piece, very readable, details the nonsense verse of Sukumar Ray. The translations that accompany it are delectable.

The reach of this volume is impressive. It covers many areas closely related to literature for children, i.e. children's libraries, comics, children's book illustration in India, literature for rural children and translations from regional lan-

guages. And each of these areas is vitally important for the all-round, healthy development of children's literature anywhere. We need lots of less faithful (read literal) and more empathetic translations of children's books in regional languages. Indi Rana suggests linking literature for rural children with health education. If you wish to write a story for rural children, pick on a single concept of health education, eg. cleanliness or immunisation. Create child characters, operating against a rural background, pack inputs of adventure, a tussle against odds and ultimate success. Add pictures and you have a memorable story that gently drives home an important point.

Anant Pai makes out a case for comics, saying that children learn better through comics than through stuffy lessons in history. One doesn't normally think of any link between comics and the 'continuity pictures' on the walls of Ajanta and Ellora but Anant Pai has set me thinking! Poile Sengupta objects to the publishing practice of turning every book into a supplementary reader by adding questions, simply because that makes it sell. She insists that if books are fun to read, values will be implicit in the text and don't have to be held up like so many banners. Realism is far from taboo but a writer for children must know where to draw the line.

The views of Abha Adams on the place of TV in relation to books are noteworthy. She says, "It is still to be recognised in India that in many ways television works for and with books, rather than against them. Children see their heroes and heroines on TV and want to read about them. Through TV they are introduced to new environments, new creatures and want to read about them. (As an example, take the motion picture 'Jurassic Park'. Millions of different books, both fiction and non fiction, were sold as a result of that picture. Dinosaurs became the fashion!)" (p.86)

What takes away the charm from *Telling Tales* is an element of repetition, with many writers giving similar details about the background of children's literature in India. This reflects a lacuna in the editing. Otherwise a useful book and a quality production, with a charming cover.